

(Rev. 10-90)

VLR-3/17/99 NRHP-6/11/99

United States Department of the Interior
National Park ServiceNATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name The Old Custom House

other names/site number VDHR file #099-
0004

2. Location

street & number Corner of Main and Read Streets not for publication ☒
city or town Yorktown vicinity
state Virginia code VA county York code 199
zip code 23690

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official

Date

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HISTORIC RESOURCES
State or Federal agency and bureau

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form
(Yorktown Custom House)
(York County, Virginia)

In my opinion, the property _____ meets _____ does not meet the National Register criteria. (_____ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

_____ entered in the National Register

_____ See continuation sheet.

_____ determined eligible for the
National Register

_____ See continuation sheet.

_____ determined not eligible for the
National Register

_____ removed from the National Register

_____ other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date
of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

☒ private

☐ public-local

☐ public-State

☐ public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

☒ building(s)

☐ district

☐ site

☐ structure

☐ object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

___0___

___0___

___0___

___0___

___0___

Noncontributing

___0___ buildings

___0___ sites

___0___ structures

___0___ objects

___0___ Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register ___4___

N/A

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat:	<u>Commerce/Trade</u>	Sub:	<u>Warehouse</u>
	<u>Government</u>		<u>Custom House</u>
	<u>Social</u>		<u>Meeting Hall</u>
	<u>Healthcare</u>		<u>Clinic</u>
	<u>Education</u>		<u>School</u>
	<u>Commerce/Trade</u>		<u>Financial Institution</u>
	<u> </u>		<u> </u>
	<u> </u>		<u> </u>

Cat: Social Sub: Meeting Hall

[illegible]

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

Colonial _____
Late 19th and 20th Century Revivals _____

foundation Brick
roof Concrete
walls Brick
other Brick/Wood

8. Statement of Significance

☒ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.

☐ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.

☒ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a

master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.

- ___ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- ___ A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
___ B removed from its original location.
___ C a birthplace or a grave.
___ D a cemetery.
___ E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
___ F a commemorative property.
___ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture_____
Commerce_____

Period of Significance 1721 ca.- 1930_____

Significant Dates 1721 ca.

1924_____
1929_____
1930_____

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

_N/A_____

Cultural Affiliation _N/A_____

Architect/Builder _Unknown_____

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS),
___ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
___ previously listed in the National Register
___ previously determined eligible by the National Register
___ designated a National Historic Landmark
X recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # 099-0004___
___ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data

X State Historic Preservation Office
___ Other State agency
___ Federal agency
___ Local government
___ University
X Other

Name of repository: Virginia Department of Historic Resources_

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property __1.5 acre__

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	18	366225	4121720	3	___	___
2	___	___	___	4	___	___
___ See continuation sheet.						

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Meg Greene Malvasi

organization_____date_October 31, 1998__

street & number 13803 Sterlings Bridge Road___ telephone 804-763-3595__

city or town Midlothian_____ state VA_ zip code 23112_

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Comte De Grasse Chapter, National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution

Street & number 411 Main Street_____ telephone 757-258-0519_____

city or town Yorktown_____ state VA_ zip code 23690_____

=====

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Section 7 Page 1

The Old Custom House _____
York County, Virginia _____

Architectural Description

Standing at the corner of Main and Read Streets in Yorktown is the "Old Custom House," a two-and-a-half-story, brick, Colonial-styled building. According to architectural historian Mark Wenger, the building is considered one of two examples of a brick colonial storehouse in the Commonwealth. The building also served in the early-to-mid-eighteenth century as one of the custom houses in the British colonies. The one-and-half-acre property also contains two brick outbuildings and an enclosed herb garden all surrounded by a handsome Flemish bond brick wall; all were part of an extensive restoration project undertaken by Richmond architect W. Duncan Lee, known for his striking and stylized interpretations of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century Colonial Revival style.

Facing northeast toward the York River, the building measures 24 feet wide, is two-and-a-half-stories high, three bays wide and two bays deep. The Custom House is constructed of brick walls, 15 inches thick, laid in a Flemish bond with glazed headers, and rests on a raised foundation of English garden bond. A corbeled brick water table runs the length of the building; because of the gradual raising of Main and Read Streets the basement foundation is only now visible on the northwest and southwest walls of the building. A three row corbeled brick string course articulates the first and second stories of the building. The hipped roof is covered with concrete shingles and has a moulded wood cornice with modillions. A corbeled brick interior end chimney pierces the southwest slope of the roof, partially obscuring a small diagonal board dormer with a small 6/6 double-hung wood sash window. The gable-front dormer roof is also covered with concrete shingles and has wide weatherboards in the gable end.

Based on early photographs, a shed roof porch marked the front facade; a smaller shed roof porch was found over the Read Street entrance. Both have since been removed. The facade's central entrance now consists of a slightly recessed wood cross-and-Bible entrance door with moulded wood surround topped by a brick segmental arch. A similar entrance door is found on the Read Street (southeast) side of the building. All the windows on the first and second story are 9/9 double-hung wood sash with wood sills and surrounds. Brick segmental arches are found on the first story windows; the second story windows are topped by brick flat arches. Two basement windows consisting of 6-light openings, with segmental brick arches, are located on the front and rear of the building.

Located on the northwest wall of the Custom House is a shed roof porch added to the house in 1929. The porch roof is supported by wood Tuscan columns and a simple wood railing; two engaged columns are located at each end of the interior porch wall. A series of wood steps with simple wood balustrade and balusters mark the slightly-off center wood cross-and-Bible entrance door. To the south of the porch is a small, projecting brick basement entrance. The gable front roof is covered with concrete shingles with a raking cornice. The small double-leaf wood round arched entrance doors with wood surrounds are topped by a brick segmental arch.

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While the interior may have undergone more alterations than the exterior, it appears (according to Mark Wenger) that the floor plan has remained essentially the unchanged; two rooms connected by a simple entrance hall, which opens onto Read Street on one end and the porch on the other. The second floor is similar in layout to the first floor. According to Mark Wenger, given the rough-hewn appearance of a number of the wood ceiling braces and the presence of lathing nails, the majority of the ceiling framing found in a portion of the basement is original as are the interior walls and steps leading to the small gable roofed entrance located on the northwest wall. This area measuring approximately 5 feet in width is a good indication of the commercial activity of the building's early history. In the basement kitchen area stands a small round arched brick oven opening with its flue bricked in. The wide pine flooring found throughout the first and second floors of the Custom House is mostly original to the building, as is the large bricked flooring in the basement.

Because the floor plan of the Custom House remains relatively unchanged, it gives an accurate indication of the daily uses to which the building was put. The Main Street entrance opens into a large room that was probably used for the storage and display of goods. An interior doorway leads to a hall with a winding wood staircase that ascends to the second floor. Another door, located near the southwest corner of the hall, leads to the basement. There are two entrance doors on either end of the hall; one leads to the side porch, the other to Read Street.

Directly above the Read Street hall entrance is a large square loft-type opening through which the baling hooks and scales were suspended to weigh and store heavy goods. To the left of the hall, a small room, known as the "Accounting Room," was used by Richard Ambler as an office. This room is dominated by a large brick segmentally arched fireplace. A corner staircase located in the southeast side of the room was removed, possibly sometime in the nineteenth century. Other evidence of the building's age can be discerned in the small loft entrance leading to the attic, where traces of early paint, "Spanish Brown," remain on the moulding.

When the Custom House was purchased by the Comte De Grasse Chapter of the DAR in 1924, the building was in poor condition. In 1929, under the direction of noted Richmond architect W. Duncan Lee and Richmond contractor E. C. Wilkinson, an ambitious restoration effort began on the Custom House. While the interior restoration was done to comply with the Chapter's wishes to use the building as a meeting hall and museum, Mr. Lee's efforts display his sympathetic handling of the building and its fabric, both in the use of decoration and materials. His work also reflects the influence of the Colonial Revival style, spurred by the advent of pictorial works illustrating colonial architecture and the resounding interest and success of Colonial Williamsburg. It is also a reflection of the more simplified translation of colonial architecture during the Depression era in which a more suggestive interpretation of colonial building elements was as effective as copying them outright.

In particular the "Old Custom House" reflects Lee's use of lightly stained woodwork, which contributed to the popular notion that eighteenth century Virginia homes contained natural wood finishes. In addition, because of Lee's work on three of Virginia's most famous architectural "icons"--Colonial

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Williamsburg, Carter's Grove, and Westover--he has been credited with popularizing the image of a "red-brick Colonial Virginia" and with creating architecturally balanced forms. The "Old Custom House," its dependencies, and surrounding brick wall embody many of Lee's stylistic trademarks.

Under Lee's direction, denticular crown moulding and paneled wainscoting of unstained pine were added to all the rooms as well as a paneled surround around the office fireplace. Although the wood was not original to the house, Mr. Lee made use of wood pieces that were of the period in recreating the wood mouldings and paneled doors found in the interior as well as period door hardware. A few of the windows were replaced as were the interior doors, with the possible exception of the front room's hall entrance door that quite possibly is original to the building.

In addition, two of the original interior doorways, one on the basement level, and the front room's interior wall, were bricked over and new ones created. On the second floor the front room was turned into a meeting room for the Comte De Grasse Chapter of the DAR. A smaller room directly above Richard Ambler's office was divided; the front became Mrs. Emma Leake Chenoweth's (the first regent of the Comte de Grasse chapter of the DAR) office, the rear turned into a bathroom.

Mr. Lee's focus on the exterior of the building was to replace components that were too badly damaged to be salvaged. This included a new roof, a replacement dormer, and the rebuilding of the brick chimney. A first story window on the Read Street side was added and the original door and surround were replicated and replaced. Mr. Lee also added the side porch and cellar entrance on the northwest wall. In some cases, the areas around the windows were on the front and rear walls were chopped in, as the masonry appears to be of a more random bond.

The other three contributing resources are also products of the 1929 restoration and were designed to complement the Custom House's architecture. Enclosing the southeast, rear, and northwest side of the Custom House property is a stately brick wall. Two brick dependencies--a kitchen and a necessary--are located near the south and west corners of the lot respectively. To maintain continuity Lee incorporated the rear walls of the two dependencies into the main structure. The wall, laid in a Flemish bond pattern, is corbeled with brick coping. A wrought iron fence on the Read Street side leads to a flight of brick steps flanked by brick wing walls into the spacious rear yard. The yard itself hosts a number of deciduous trees and bushes.

The kitchen is brick, laid in Flemish bond; the gable side roof is covered with wood shingles and has a raking cornice and boxed eaves. On the west end of the building is an exterior corbeled brick, double shouldered chimney with a segmental arched oven opening. The off-center entrance is slightly recessed with a vertical board door. Two small 9-light casement windows are found on the front and east side of the kitchen.

The small brick necessary is also laid in Flemish bond. Its pyramidal hipped roof is covered with wood shingles and topped by a small finial. The slightly recessed, central entrance door is wood vertical board. Two small 4-light windows with wood surrounds are located on the east and north walls.

Located near the north corner of the wall is a small entrance way that leads to an herb garden, also enclosed by a brick wall laid in Flemish bond with coping. The current garden, planted in 1976 and maintained by the local

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chapter of the Children of the American Revolution, also contains a sundial and wood bench that sit among the native flowers and herbs. Though added later, the garden further complements the character of the building and grounds.

In later years, certain mechanical updates, including heating and cooling units, a security system, and new wiring have been done to protect and preserve the building. However all the work has been performed in such a manner that does not detract from the original appearance of the building.

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Statement of Significance

Standing at the corner of Main and Read Streets in Yorktown is the "Old Custom House," a two-and-a-half-story, red brick, colonial-styled building. The building is considered one of two examples of a surviving brick colonial storehouse in the Commonwealth, as well as having served in the early-to-mid-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as one of the oldest colonial custom houses in the country. The "Old Custom House" is eligible for consideration under National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C, in that the building is an excellent example of a brick colonial storehouse used in the eighteenth centuries as well as being a good example of the restoration work of noted Virginia architect, W. Duncan Lee, known for his stylized interpretations of the popular Colonial Revival style. The building, built by Richard Ambler around 1721, also represented the growing prosperity of one of Yorktown's leading families. Despite the ravages of time, the "Old Custom House," besides having been used as a store and customs house, was occupied at various times by a doctor's office, a school, a variety of businesses, and was even pressed into service for the military during the Revolutionary, the Civil, and the First World Wars.

The village of Yorktown, Virginia lies twelve miles north of Jamestown, and is situated on the banks of the York River, the shortest and among the deepest of the major rivers leading into the Chesapeake Bay. First settled in 1622, by the early eighteenth century Yorktown had grown into a thriving community with a population of about 3,000 persons. During those years Yorktown served as a major commercial center. Its port was among the largest and busiest between Philadelphia and Charleston. The Yorktown District, for which Richard Ambler would serve as Collector of Customs, encompassed the York, Poquoson, and Pankatank Rivers, as well as Mobjack Bay and other harbors. It was one of six districts for customs collecting, and was considered one of the most important customs districts in colonial Virginia.¹

There is still some question of when exactly the "Old Custom House" was built. Initially, Lot 43, which the building would occupy, was owned by Captain Daniel Taylor. Upon failing to build a dwelling on the lot as required by law, Captain Taylor was compelled to sell the land for 180 pounds of tobacco to George Burton in 1706. Presumably Burton met the stipulations stated by the law and built a dwelling on the lot. The property passed to Burton's daughter Anne and her husband Christopher Haynes of Mulberry Island. In 1721, when Lot 43 was sold to Richard Ambler, there was a listing of several buildings on the property, but no mention of a brick storehouse.²

¹ Clyde F. Trudell, *Colonial Yorktown*, p. 38, Charles Hatch, *Colonial Yorktown's Main Street*, p. 71.

² Hatch, *Colonial Yorktown's*, p.71-72.

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Although the building is known as the "Old Custom House," it was in reality built as a storehouse. And although no certain date can be specified for its construction, it would be reasonable to conclude that Ambler began to build the custom house soon after his purchase of Lot 43 in 1721. The style and substance of the building and the purpose for which it was to be used indicate that Ambler had it built for his mercantile enterprises. Like other colonial storehouses, Ambler's brick storehouse consisted of a large front room in which to store and sell goods and a small back room or "office," which often supplied the only source of heat, hence the rear chimney. Windows on these early stores were limited to the front and sometimes the rear so that the side walls could accommodate ample shelving.³ A wood breezeway connected the storehouse with Ambler's residence, a two-story wood dwelling.⁴

One of the earliest mentions of the "Old Custom House" is found in the December 2, 1773 edition of the Virginia Gazette, which describes Ambler's holdings as including a "very commodious [house] with four rooms above and four below" as well as a "large brick storehouse." The property also contained a "well cultivated Garden, Stables, Kitchen, Wash House &c., in good repair."⁵

Richard Ambler, born in York, England in 1690, migrated to Virginia as a young man. By 1720 he had settled in Yorktown, where he soon became a prosperous merchant, while making shrewd purchases of the local real estate. In 1721 Ambler purchased the strategically located Lot 43 at the corner of Main and Read Streets from the heirs of George Burton for L30. The lot, which had good access to both the harbor and the Yorktown waterfront, would hold both his residence and the now surviving brick storehouse. Soon, needing additional space, Richard Ambler purchased Lots 44 and 45.⁶

Because of his reputation as a successful merchant, Ambler appeared to be a natural selection for the post as Customs Officer. Up to this point, colonial Virginia had no publicly owned or operated custom houses; what custom houses existed were run as privately-owned facilities. The early colonial customs officers were appointed by the commissioners of customs in London on the recommendation of the colonial governor and Council. They were often, but not always, drawn from the local upper class residents. A collector tended to operate from his place of residence or business, if it was convenient for ship officers to reach. Otherwise, a separate office was opened. In any case, the terms "office" and "custom house" were interchangeable. The customs collectors were charged with keeping the seal and district records, issuing

³ Carl R. Lounsbury, An Illustrated Glossary of Early Southern Architecture & Landscape, p. 355.

⁴ Hope M. Hockenberry, "The Amblers of Virginia: A Family's Rise to Prominence," MA thesis, College of William and Mary, 1973, p.43.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Hatch, Colonial Yorktown's, p.72.

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clearances and other official paperwork.⁷

As far as day-to-day business went, the collector was a key figure in the local mercantile system. As customs collector of Yorktown Richard Ambler held an especially important post as the port of Yorktown was one of the busiest in the colonies. He not only prospered economically and socially from his duties, but was in the position of receiving and relaying news from abroad while apprising the Crown of local activities.⁸

Appointed to the post in 1724, Ambler served as "Collector of Yorke River in Virginia" until his death in 1766, after which his three sons, John, Edward, and Jaquelin successively served in the same capacity. John died shortly after his father in 1766. Edward died the following year, leaving the youngest son Jaquelin to manage the family holdings.

Both Richard and Jaquelin Ambler periodically advertised in the Virginia Gazette illustrating their various responsibilities:

Some Time in September last, there was landed from on board the ship Friendship, Capt. Christian Holm, Master and put into my Sore-house [sic] in York-Town, a large Cake, and a small Box, mark'd FI, which are supposed to contain a Clock and its Weights: The Owner mau have them deliver'd on producing the Bill of Lading, and paying the Charge of this Advertisement.

--Richard Ambler⁹

On Monday the 9th instant, came into this port, a schooner of about forty tons . . . from port Beaufort in South Carolina . . . The owner is desired to make speedy application for said vessel, as she may suffer great injury from the worm, if continued any length of time in this river.

--J. Ambler¹⁰

With the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, Jaquelin Ambler's prosperous life was disrupted, and to escape the fighting he moved his family from Yorktown. At one point the Ambler's property was taken over for use as a barracks. This resulted in the eventual destruction of the garden, fences, and outbuildings. The Ambler house was damaged to the point that it "put it out of his power to make it a comfortable residence for his family."¹¹ Consequently, Jaquelin Ambler sold the property with the brick storehouse to Thomas Wyld Jr., in 1781. Wyld made extensive repairs to the house and grounds and operated an

⁷ Letter from Arthur Pierce Middleton to Sarah C. Amistead, June 26, 1951, Comte de Grasse Chapter DAR files.

⁸ Hockenberry, p. 56.

⁹ Virginia Gazette, December 5, 1745.

¹⁰ Virginia Gazette, May 26, 1768.

¹¹ Hatch, Colonial Yorktown's, p.76.

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ordinary within the dwelling and the storehouse. Eventually he was forced out by the British later in 1781. After the British came French troops who wintered in Yorktown during 1781. A French officer who remained behind after his unit left surveyed the town, carefully noting among other buildings, the "Old Custom House." The building featured prominently in his plans, as opposed to the Ambler residence.¹²

Because the transfer of deed to Thomas Wyld was never properly completed, Jaquelin Ambler recovered the former family property in a court suit settled in 1793.¹³ He held onto the property for four more years and finally sold it for good in 1797 to local merchant named Alexander Macaulay.¹⁴ The sale ended the Ambler's 77-year possession of lots 43, 44, and 45.

From 1797 until 1882 the Custom House property remained in the Macaulay family, being passed from Alexander to his wife Elizabeth, and subsequently to a son, Patrick Macaulay and a daughter and son-in-law, Helen Macaulay Anderson and Robert Anderson. A Mutual Assurance Society Insurance Policy issued in 1818 described the property as consisting of a two-story wood dwelling, a brick store, a wood kitchen measuring 16 by 20 feet, another kitchen of brick covered with wood measuring 20 by 22 feet, a stable of 28 by 22 feet and a smokehouse.¹⁵ After Anderson's death in 1859 the property remained as part of his estate until it was sold in 1882.¹⁶

In 1865, during the Civil War, General J. B. Magruder of the Confederate Army commandeered the property as his headquarters. A photograph of the building taken by Matthew Brady (featured in a brochure) during this period shows the ruins of the home, the breezeway, and a wood kitchen dependency.¹⁷ The "Old Custom House" is also featured in at least two watercolor sketches done by a Union Army topographical engineer, Robert Knox Sneden.¹⁸

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, (1882-1922), the "Old Custom House" changed hands and functions in a variety of ways. In 1882 the building was sold at public auction for \$980 to an African-American physician, Dr. D. M. Norton, who had his office in Richard Ambler's former "Accounting Room." Upstairs the building housed a private school for Africa-American

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hockenberry, p.43., Deed Book 7, p. 305.

¹⁵ Mutual Assurance Society Policy No. 1036 issued to Elizabeth Macaulay, as described in Hatch, Colonial Yorktown's, p. 77.

¹⁶ Deed Book 7 p. 305.

¹⁷ Comte de Grasse Chapter DAR, "Yorktown's Historic Customhouse," n.p..

¹⁸ "The Civil War Drawings of Robert K. Sneden," exhibition at the Virginia Historical Society, December, 1998.

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children. Sometime in 1889 interested Chicagoans attempted to purchase several Yorktown landmarks, including the "Old Custom House," for the upcoming Columbian Exposition of 1893, but were rebuffed by outraged locals.¹⁹ During the period 1908-1917, the building accommodated at various times, a branch of the Peninsular Bank of Williamsburg on the first floor, a barbershop on the second floor, and on at least two occasions, a store. During the First World War, the Custom House housed military personnel. From 1921-1922, the building was used as a residence, housing one family and another dozen or so men who worked on construction projects in the area.²⁰

In 1922 Mrs. Adele M. Blow purchased the property from Dr. Norton's heirs for \$10,000. Mrs. Blow owned the building until 1924 when the Comte De Grasse Chapter of the DAR (so named after the French admiral who fought at the Battle of Yorktown) under the leadership of Mrs. Emma Leake Chenoweth, purchased the property for \$6000. By 1927, through an ambitious fund raising campaign that not only captured local but state and national interest, the Comte De Grasse Chapter had paid off the balance of the mortgage and owned the Custom House property outright. On October 24, 1924 the building was formally dedicated, and was to be used as a chapter meeting house. The Custom House would also house a museum documenting the building's and Yorktown's early history.²¹

By the time of the DAR acquisition in 1924, Richard Ambler's former storehouse was in poor condition. Although the structure remained intact, windows and their shutters were broken or missing, the roof leaked, and the front porch had disappeared. Anxious that the building not suffer further deterioration, Mrs. Chenoweth embarked on an arduous restoration project. In a letter of 1928 to another Chapter member, Mrs. Letitia Pate Evans, Mrs. Chenoweth wrote "the building is deteriorating very rapidly and has so bravely survived war and storm . . . always a notable and historic landmark in the heart of Yorktown and thus rendering it so important that the building is restored and preserved to posterity."²²

In 1929, Mrs. Evans agreed to underwrite the cost of the restoration, which by its conclusion in 1930 amounted to almost \$40,000. A noted local Richmond architect, W. Duncan Lee, and a Richmond contractor, E. C. Wilkinson, who did the restoration work of Carter's Grove among other projects, were engaged to carry out the work. Many years later Lee wrote of the Custom House "having perfect proportions and perfect colonial detail, the color and life of the bricks on the Reade [sic] Street side have no equal anywhere. Compare this wall of the building with the best of the original brick work in

¹⁹ James M. Lindgren, *Preserving the Old Dominion*, 1993, p. 160.

²⁰ Hatch, *Colonial Yorktown's*, p.77, Comte de Grasse Chapter DAR, *The Yorktown Custom House, 1720-1981*, p.4.

²¹ Charlotte Hughes Brown, *A History--The Chenoweth Years, 1922-1957*, 1984, p. 6.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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Williamsburg and you will see what I mean."²³ Lee noted of the building's condition that:

a thorough examination of the exterior of the building showed all material and workmanship of the same date, probably the first quarter of the 18th century and that the only alterations were the closing of a window on Reade [sic] Street and a tin roof. The window and roof material were replaced. The interior had probably been altered many times but since the object was to house the chapter and not restore the Custom House interior we did not go into the historical data . . . I am quite proud of the yard wall and out buildings which were entirely new but built out of old material. . . . The interior woodwork is all of old material."²⁴

On November 15, 1930, shortly after the completion of the restoration work, another dedication ceremony was held with then-governor John Garland Pollard dedicating the restored Custom House to "the memory and the spirit of the men and women who achieved American independence." In the following years, the Custom House hosted a number of DAR activities as well as participating in the annual celebration of "Yorktown Days" held every October. Today the Old Custom House still serves as a chapter meeting place for the Comte de Grasse Chapter of the DAR. It is open to the public at no charge on Sundays, holidays, and other occasions as warranted. The Comte De Grasse Chapter has also offered its facilities to local historical groups as well as the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities.

In addition to the architectural and historical significance of the building, the Comte De Grasse Chapter holds several historic artifacts and documents, some of which are on display. These include a rare map of Yorktown and the vicinity dated 1881, several family heirlooms belonging to the prominent Nelson family of Virginia, including pieces of Spode china used when the Nelson family entertained the Marquis de Lafayette in 1824, the Nelson family Bible dated 1763, and 250 books from the Nelson family library on permanent loan to the College of William and Mary. There is also a gold pocket watch belonging to Admiral De Grasse, a lock of George Washington's hair, and a piece from his wedding vest among other items. Of special interest are the architectural blueprints and correspondence concerning the restoration work done by Duncan Lee. Since most of his personal papers and drawings were destroyed after his death, these documents are invaluable in assessing the Custom House's architectural significance and Lee's restoration efforts.

The Old Custom House in Yorktown stands today as a one of the few surviving structures not only of the colonial and Revolutionary periods but of the Civil War era as well. Both the original architecture and the twentieth-century restoration work of Duncan Lee make the building noteworthy. Although the "Old Custom House" has endured long periods of neglect, it stands as one of

²³ Letter from Duncan Lee to Sarah Armistead, October 21, 1951.

²⁴ Brown, p. 10-11.

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the best examples of a colonial brick storehouse. In addition to its architectural significance, the important role the building played in the development of the early colonial economy attests that the Old Custom House deserves recognition by being placed on the National Register.

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Verbal Boundary Description

The "Old Custom House" occupies the Town of Yorktown, Lots 43, 44, and 45, Deed Book 39A. The legal description is as follows:

Beginning at a point on Main Street thirty five (35) feet from the corner of lot thirty seven (37) and running along Main Street to the intersection of Main and Read Streets, a distance of ninety seven (97) feet more or less, then in a southwesterly direction along the line of Read Street a distance of one hundred and twenty (120) feet, then along a line parallel with Main Street, a distance of ninety seven (97) feet more or less, to the corner of the lot reserved by Annie McNorton Brooks and J. C. Brooks her husband of Norfolk, Virginia, and Nelson F. McNorton and Carrie McNorton, his wife, of the town of York, State of Virginia, then along the line of said lot a distance of one hundred and twenty (120) feet more to less to the point of beginning, together with the building thereon known as the Old Custom House .

Boundary Justification

These are the original boundaries as deeded to Emma L. Chenoweth, April 29, 1924, and includes the building historically associated with the property.

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Additional Documentation
List of Photographs

All photographs are of:
The "Old Custom House"
Yorktown, Virginia
VDHR File Number #099-0004
Meg Greene Malvasi, photographer

All negatives on file with Virginia Department Of Historic Resources

DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: Front facade, looking West
NEGATIVE NO.: 17242
PHOTO 1 OF 16

DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: Custom House, Front Entrance
NEGATIVE NO.: 17242
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DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: Rear and West Side
NEGATIVE NO.: 17242
PHOTO 2 OF 16

DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: Window Detail
NEGATIVE NO.: 17242
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DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: Brick Necessary, West View
NEGATIVE NO.: 17242
PHOTO 3 OF 16

DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: Ceiling Beams Detail
NEGATIVE NO.: 17242
PHOTO 10 OF 16

DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: Brick Kitchen, SW View
NEGATIVE NO.: 17242
PHOTO 4 OF 16

DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: Interior Hall Door Detail
NEGATIVE NO.: 17242
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DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: Gate Detail, NW View
NEGATIVE NO.: 17242
PHOTO 5 OF 16

DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: Basement entrance detail,
West view
NEGATIVE NO.: 17242
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DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: Wall Detail
NEGATIVE NO.: 17242
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DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: Front Room, NE View
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DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: Garden and Wall, South View
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DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: Office Fireplace, Detail
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DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: First Floor Front Room, South View
NEGATIVE NO.: 17242
PHOTO 15 OF 16

DATE: October 2, 1998
VIEW OF: Second Floor Meeting Room, East View
NEGATIVE NO.: 17242
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